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ABSTRACT

A state administrator considers the controversy concerning overrepresentation of students in learning disabilities (LD) classes and examines the implications of serving LD students. He asserts that students in LD classes are those who can tolerate intensive teaching and have a good chance of returning to the regular class. In discussing the fate of LD students who haven't learned minimum standards, he suggests that reason for failure to learn be quickly addressed and a range of service options (providing different materials, transferring to a different teacher, etc.) be investigated. The core issue in serving LD students, he suggests, is how best to serve all students experiencing academic problems. Advantages and disadvantages of six possible solutions (including reserving LD teachers for those students who are clearly LD and establishing regular classroom preventive classes) are noted. (CL)

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"An Administrator Views Programs for the Specific Learning Disability Student"

Specific Learning Disabilities: it's the latest handicapping condition to be identified officially, and it undoubtedly is now undergoing its test by fire.

One proof of that is the report of the U.S. General Accounting Office that came out September 30, 1981. Right on the cover the statement was made that "certain categories such as learning disabilities are over-represented in special education." Then, inside, they gave the following statistics--based on 1980-81 figures:

-- L.D. children exceed the number of children in any other category of handicapping condition (36% of those counted under P.L. 94-142 in 1980-81 were L.D.);

-- In 6 states, over half of the handicapped children counted under P.L. 94-142 are L.D.;

-- The proportion of children counted across the nation under P.L. 94-142 as L.D. has reached 3% of school-age children;

-- Few findings describe the types of children who are being identified as L.D. "These children may include those with mild learning problems, slow learners, and/or children who formerly would have been labeled mentally retarded." (p. v, GAO Report).

So there we have two of the ingredients of the current controversy raging around Learning Disabilities: (1) some people feel too many youngsters are being identified as L.D., and (2) some people feel that

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many children who are not L.D. are in L.D. programs.

As for the variety of children now in L.D. programs: the category "Specific Learning Disability" (S.L.D.) includes a highly heterogeneous group of individuals even when the term is carefully defined. When it is broadly defined (e.g., as it is at present under P.L. 94-142, with no elaboration concerning I.Q. criteria), the heterogeneous group that results can be almost unmanageable in a school division's L.D. program. And it is growing moreso as youngsters are taken out of Remedial Reading and Chapter I programs and put in L.D. programs.

With this information as background, then, let's look at the Who, What, and How of the situation.

I would like to discuss Who can benefit from an L.D. program, and therefore who should be in L.D. programs.

First, there is a need to clarify the goals of a Specific Learning Disabilities program, if we are to know who can benefit from such programs. The goals should be:

-- To provide an optimum learning environment, with as intensive teaching as the youngster can tolerate, in order to bring basic skills up to a level so the youngster can eventually be returned to the regular classroom for all or most of the school day;

-- To coordinate the curriculum of the L.D. student with that of the student's peers at the same grade level, in order to ease the transition back to the regular classroom when the time comes;

-- To provide successful academic experiences so the student will regain confidence in his/her abilities;

-- To encourage growth in socializing and other nonacademic skills in order to promote self-confidence and acceptance by regular education peers.

The youngsters who should be in such a program are those who can tolerate intensive teaching and who have a good chance of gaining the skills they need so they can be returned to the regular classroom for all or most of the school day -- that is, if regular education teachers are properly prepared to teach to their students' different learning styles.

The youngsters who should not be in an S.L.D. program are those who are referred because "there's no place else to put them." Slow learners should remain in regular education, with the benefit of ancillary services. They should not be subjected to the intensity of a properly-designed L.D. program. Nor should the youngsters whose problems are caused by immaturity, and borderline Educable Mentally Retarded youngsters.

What

Now I'd like to turn to What:

- What is to be learned and how do we know it's been learned? Also,
- What should we do with students who haven't learned the minimum?

First, we must ask what determines the minimum to be learned by any regular education student at any grade level? Here we would include L.D. students, since the curriculum for correctly-selected L.D. students would be very much the same as for regular education students.

We all know that the curriculum in some cases is determined by the local school division. In other cases it's based on textbooks the school division has adopted. In Virginia, Standards of Learning are being developed.

Then we must ask how do we know when a youngster has learned what we feel he should know? Some school divisions give standardized tests

at regular intervals. Others use tests provided by textbook publishers. In Virginia, we are designing tests to go with our Standards of Learning.

But the most important question for those of us here today must be: What do we do with youngsters who haven't learned the minimum?

In most school divisions, several options are available without moving the child out of regular education:

- Remedial courses
- Chapter I services
- Moving the student to a different teacher
- Providing different materials
- Moving the younster to a more appropriate grade level
- Psychological or counseling services for the youngster and/or the family
- An evaluation of the teaching methods being used for the youngster: are they appropriate for his/her learning style (e.g., is the teacher using primarily a lecture style, but the student's dysgraphia precludes taking notes).

Or it may be determined that the younster should be considered for special education help.

It is vital that an investigation into reasons for the failure to learn should be made quickly, before a "failure mode" sets in for the youngster. A student shouldn't have to experience repeated failure before the school division takes action to put him or her into the kind of program where the youngster can find success.

<u>How</u>

Now we've arrived at <u>How</u> -- the point at which I can claim soap-

box-mounting time, to suggest some solutions to some of the problems we've said we're facing, among which are:

-- Too many youngsters in L.D. programs;

-- Youngsters in L.D. programs who are not L.D.;

-- The shortage of L.D. teachers who are properly endorsed;

-- Youngsters who are not L.D. but who don't learn what is considered the minimum that needs to be learned.

Perhaps the big problem facing us in the U.S. is <u>not</u> how to correctly identify L.D. students, in order to put them into L.D. programs, taught by properly trained L.D. teachers. Perhaps the root problem is how best to serve <u>all</u> students experiencing academic problems.

This undoubtedly was the problem facing educators years ago which was identified and then dealt with by organizing classes for the retarded, the hearing and visually impaired, etc., etc. However, there remained a group still experiencing academic problems but who did not fit under the other identified categories. In an attempt to help these youngsters, the term "Learning Disabilities" was coined rather recently and L.D. programs were designed.

It appears to me that the problem of helping that "remaining group" now called L.D. has not been solved because the group does not constitute a manageably homogeneous entity.

If one accepts this thesis and tries to set forth solutions to the problem, one might suggest several possibilities:

1. Define L.D. narrowly, thereby reducing the numbers in the programs;
2. Define L.D. narrowly, (as above), then identify the remaining groups which are now included in L.D. and establish special

education programs to meet their needs;

3. Prepare regular education teachers at the pre-service level to teach in ways that make it possible for kids to learn--no matter what the youngsters' learning styles are;
4. Prepare a group of regular education teachers to use the special techniques that perhaps 25%-33% of the student population needs--those now called Slow Learners, "unmotivated," "immature," Language Delayed, and, in many cases, L.D. These could constitute preventive classes with 20-25 students.
5. Reserve a group of L.D. teachers, expertly trained, to provide help to youngsters whose needs couldn't be met in regular education nor preventive classes, nor through Remedial Reading and Chapter I services and who are clearly L.D. The caseloads would be kept small so L.D. students would receive the intensive, individual kind of instruction which would allow rapid progress and their as-early-as-possible return to regular education.
6. Strongly encourage Remedial Reading and Chapter I teachers to work closely with L.D. teachers--all three sharing techniques and materials.

There are advantages and disadvantages to the above suggestions:

To No. 1 (Define L.D. narrowly): This, by itself, would not provide help for those children who would not qualify for L.D. programs under the narrowly defined criteria; they are perhaps the same children who have recently been referred to L.D. programs from Remedial Reading and Chapter I.

To No. 2 (Define L.D. narrowly and establish special education programs for the remainder): The number of special education categories, each

with their special education teachers, would have to be increased. But the present economic climate would not allow this.

To No. 3 (Prepare regular education teachers to adjust their teaching methods to students' learning styles): Doesn't this seem to be long overdue?

To No. 4 (Establishing regular education preventive classes): This seems sensible, and is not an untried idea; LEAs in various parts of the U.S. have found this a useful plan. The cost to local school divisions would not be increased; it would involve changes in teacher preparation, however.

To No. 5 (Reserve L.D. teachers for those who are clearly L.D.): Perhaps this would eliminate the shortage of L.D. teachers found in some states. It certainly would help to reduce the length of time most L.D. youngsters remain in L.D. programs.

To No. 6 (Encourage cooperation among Remedial Reading, Chapter I, and L.D. teachers): This would allow more youngsters to stay in regular education. It would also provide for smoother transition if a youngster moves from, say, Remedial Reading into Chapter I and later into an L.D. program.

To accomplish the best of these suggestions would require the cooperation of colleges and universities, the awareness of local superintendents and principals that some innovative programming is necessary if they are to fine-tune their L.D. programs, and leadership at the State Department level in encouraging regular education and special education to work together more creatively.

Impossible? Perhaps. But can we afford to resist change just because it's uncomfortable? I think not. Too many youngsters are depending on us.